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From Syncretism to Synthesis:

Hubert Fichte's and Vilém Flusser's View of the Brazilian Cultural Endeavor

Present day theoretical reflection about cultural encounters and exchanges is dominated by the concept of hybridity. Within the context of post-modernism and in particular post-colonial theory it has actually become the very focus of analytical attention and this, despite its fundamental ambivalence and biological root. As Deborah Kapchan and Pauline Turner put it, “because of this ambiguity, the term *hybridity* is bothersome. It threatens to dissolve difference into a pool of homogenization. It is biological, yet resists definition.” (Kapchan / Turner 1999: 240) Its predominance in recent analyses has a lot to do with “practices of citation in academic disciplines.” (*ibid.*: 242) One might even say that post-colonial theory has created over the years a citation cartel whose main negative effect has been the exclusion of other earlier competing terms. In order to demystify the concept of hybridity and at the same time evaluate its explanatory potential Kapchan and Turner propose to compare it with related notions reopening the field of discussion by engaging a new theoretical dialogue.

One of the three alternative concepts they suggest is that of *creolization*, “*hybridity's* immediate interlocutor in the discourse of the social sciences and humanities.” (*ibid.*: 241) I would like, however, to focus on the other two that are of particular relevance for Hubert Fichte's analyses of Brazilian Afro-American religious cults: syncretism and ‘bricolage’. The first one was introduced in 1966 by Melville Herskovits in *The New World Negro: Selected Papers in Afroamerican Studies* (Herskovits 1966) dedicated among other things, to complex composite religious forms like Voodoo and Candomblé that combine and mix Christian and African elements.

Herskovits posits a magnet effect of attraction and adherence between similar forms which are conserved and elaborated upon. When resemblance is lacking dominant cultural traits are carried over into the new cultural context and reinterpreted in the light of their surroundings. Postcolonial theory – and Vilém Flusser, for that matter – would describe such specifically intercultural negotiations in terms of translation. Herskovits' theory intended to highlight adaptation, assimilation as well as reconciliation, rather than parallel coexistence of separate cultural domains.

The term 'bricolage', on the other hand, has been developed by Claude Lévi-Strauss in his *La pensée sauvage* published in 1962. The concept introduces a playful and experimental dimension and can be applied to many forms of cultural borrowings. Fichte makes use of it in his description of Afro-American religious cults. The 'bricoleur' does not need to possess a specific cultural rootedness. On the contrary: he communicates his rootlessness to the very things he is dealing with: he "unhinges forms from their rootedness in history" (*ibid.*: 240) and freely recombines the various cultural forms at his disposal in order to produce a new makeshift whole. In this ludic sense the notion of 'bricolage' can also be traced in Flusser's work. His *homo ludens* is uprooted, 'bodenlos', that is, without a territory in which to radicate himself. Syncretism and 'bricolage' stress different aspects. As Kapchan and Turner put it: "Unlike *syncretism*, *bricolage* is particularly apt in describing the unmotivated combinations that characterize the playfulness of postmodern forms (...)" (*ibid.*: 241), as for instance in hip-hop or techno-rave.

The third term I would like to introduce here is synthesis, which plays a central role in Vilém Flusser's work and in particular in his analysis of the Brazilian attempt at creating a new heterogeneous unity out of disparate cultural elements. In his early work the concept is close to Gadamer's notion of *Horizontverschmelzung*, implying an effort at homogenization of the heterogeneous. In latter texts, however, a view stressing difference and discord slowly surfaces and finally takes over. In this sense Flusser's use of the concept of synthesis is both different from and similar to Fichte's use of the notion of syncretism. The theoretical bridge between the two is the

idea of a playful ‘bricolage’ stressing at the same time a sense of inventiveness *and* inconclusiveness. The unity Flusser and Fichte think of could also be described in terms of a constant negotiation and renegotiation.

I would like to discuss the relevance of the notions of syncretism, and synthesis – and to a lesser extent that of ‘bricolage’ – within the scope of Hubert Fichte’s and Vilém Flusser’s narrative of the multilayered Brazilian cultural project, focusing on their specific view of the Baroque as an intercontinental and trans-historical endeavor. Both authors detect traces of the European Baroque within the Latin American neo-baroque notably in two of its Brazilian versions: Flusser who lived from 1941 to 1972 in São Paulo analyzed the Baroque buildings and churches of the school of Alejandrinho in Ouro Preto and Fichte who came to Bahia the first time in 1968 and revisited Brazil several times in the following years studied the rituals of the Candoblé in Bahia de Todos os Santos and the Casa das Minas in São Luiz de Maranhão. Before dealing in detail with Fichte’s and Flusser’s description of Brazilian baroque I would like, however, to focus briefly on César Augusto Salgado’s reconstruction of New World Baroque theory first (Salgado 1999), in order to delineate the necessary context from within which Fichte’s and Flusser’s endeavor may be appropriately appraised.

Before the Neo-baroque theorists conquered the field from the 1950s to the 1980s – among them Lima, Carpentier, Sarduy and Haroldo De Campos – Latin American baroque was generally viewed as a phase of aesthetic decline and decadence, a period of political and social stagnation, characterized by superfluity, indolence, languor and effeminacy. The new positive reading of mestizo literature initiated by Neo-baroque writers contradicted, thus, the master narrative prevailing in Latin American historiography. This interpretative reversal was accompanied by an innovative interest in other non-literary means of expression, above all the pictorial and architectural arts. The earlier generation of philologists gave way to a group of

theorists with a much more eclectic education and a more interdisciplinary and fluid notion of culture. This is a point they have in common with Flusser and Fichte.

Fichte's own conception of the Baroque is strongly influenced by the work of Ernst Robert Curtius (Curtius 1948) and Gustav René Hocke who stressed the originality and creativity of what they called *manierism*. The term was first intended for the poetry of German Baroque writers like Caspar David Lohenstein accused of practicing a writing style that was far too pompous and ornamental. Following in the steps of Curtius, Hocke reevaluated in his two books (Hocke 1957 and 1959) the general aesthetic significance of *manierism* pointing out links to the European avant-garde, especially French surrealism.

A key figure in the context of Latin American New Baroque theory was the Hungarian art historian and archeologist Pál Kelemen who published in 1951 his highly influential *Baroque and Rococo in Latin America* (Kelemen 1951), a heterogeneous work of scholarship combining art history, travel anecdotes and the methods of anthropological fieldwork. His "calculated disparagement of the metropolitan paradigm" was a consequence of the crisis provoked by the destructions of World War II. "For Kelemen, the New World is the site where the moribund European model will be preserved and transformed (...)." (Salgado 1999: 321) The New World had an invigorating, healing influence running opposite to the "decadent debilitation" (*ibid.*: 323) of the old.

The same could be said for Flusser's view of post-historical manifestations within Brazilian culture. Kelemen, furthermore, suggests correspondences between New World architecture and some European avant-garde movements of the early 20th century. On New World ground a novel coherent patchwork, juxtaposing disparate architectural modes from Africa and Europe has been made possible. Add to this the fact that the overlapping of foreign and native has led to a "positive" mongrelization of European high styles." (*ibid.*: 317) These aspects are absolutely central for Fichte's view of Afro-Brazilian syncretism as an aesthetic phenomenon.

Salgado sees in New World Baroque “a hidden inscription of difference within the fictional sameness of official culture, as rebellious graffiti camouflaged in the forest of baroque symbols.” (*ibid.*: 317-8) He begins his essay with a quotation from Alejo Carpentier – a leading figure within New World Baroque – which very aptly captures a central moment in Fichte’s and Flusser’s view of Brazilian baroque. “America, continent of symbiosis, of mutations, of vibrations, of *mestizajes*, has been baroque from the start. (...) And why is Latin America the promised land of the baroque? Because all symbiosis, all *mestizaje*, gives rise to baroque.” (*ibid.*: 316) This sentence finds an echo in Flusser’s closing remarks from his essay *Barroco Mineiro visto de Praga* published in 1966: “O espírito barroco encontrou no Brasil o seu habitat apropriado. A despeito dos positivismos e outros ismos posteriores, será o Brasil sempre uma terra barroca.” (Flusser 1966)

Carpentier’s quotation, postulating a circular, basically tautological explanation for the relationship between the Baroque and the New World, is begging the question. In fact, why should there be such a deeply rooted connection between the two at all? For González-Echeverría, who stresses the moment of continuity, the new American sensibility found in the Baroque, an “avenue for the different, the strange (...) the American” (González-Echeverría 1993: 198) and a compensation “for a weak Hispanic Romanticism”. (Salgado 1999: 326 n° 4) Salgado, on the other hand, insisting on ruptures, sees in this recuperation a “response to the failure of enlightened ideas to transform and modernize Latin American society and culture.” (*ibid.*) As the following is going to show, Flusser’s and Fichte’s attempt at explanation stress completely different dimensions closely tied to their European origin and biography.

Hubert Fichte was born in Hamburg in 1935. As a half-Jew and bisexual his life was threatened by destruction from the very beginning. As a seven year old his mother had to hide him in a catholic orphanage in Bavaria to avoid detection by the Nazis. He worked for several years as an actor and cultivated a life on the fring-

es refusing easy assimilation into the cultural establishment. Autodidact as Flusser himself, he published literary, journalistic and essayistic works. Fichte made use of ethnographic and journalistic methods studying forms of ritualized behavior in marginalized subcultures in urban environments in the 1960s and 1970s: teenagers living on the edge of society, prostitutes and pimps in Sankt Pauli and sexual deviants in sado-masochistic groupings. His interest in Afro-American syncretism basically extends this theoretical approach to a new margin, the edge of the Western industrialized and secularized world. His focus is on the connection between a manieristic aesthetics and bisexuality in a bi-continental Afro-American environment. In the syncretistic cults of Brazilian Candomblé (Fichte 1976) he detects traces of a trans-historical and trans-cultural poetics of human behavior, ‘eine Poetik menschlicher Verhaltensweise’ (see Guldin 1991). Interestingly enough, Fichte does not use the terms baroque or manieristic in his first writings on the ‘terreiros’ of Bahia de Todos os Santos, but in his later reflections on Caspar David Lohenstein’s play *Agrippina*. He projects the model of European manierism onto Afro-American syncretism. In the syncretistic cults art, religion and everyday life are fused and high and low cultural domains intermixed, as in the European avant-garde movements, in collage and Pop Art. Emblematic in this respect is the syncretistic altar that Fichte understands in terms of a manieristic ‘conchetto’. “Wie in den Elendsvierteln wird (...) alles verwendet, was zugänglich ist. Eine Religion der Bricollage, eine Flick-enmythologie” (Fichte 1978: 116-7) – As in the slums everything available is used. A religion of ‘bricolage’, a patchwork mythology. At the margins of the western industrialized world where the concept of linear historical progress breaks down Fichte discovers the highly ambivalent embryonic forms of a new playful aesthetic way of life that merges genres the same way it mixes sexual roles and amalgamates contradictory life-styles in a collage that continuously arranges and rearranges the modern with the archaic. Afro-Brazilian syncretism is an example of an all-embracing baroque vision of the world, ‘eine barocke Weltumarmung’, as he calls it.

Vilém Flusser (compare Guldin 2005) was born in 1921 in Prague. Because of his Jewish origin, he was forced to leave his home-town when the Nazi troops entered Czechoslovakia in early 1939. In 1941 he reached Brazil. He was the only survivor. The rest of his family, his mother, father and sister, perished in the Nazi extermination camps. Flusser studied a few semesters in Prague and London but even if he ended up working in Brazilian universities in the 1960s, he distanced himself from the academic world cultivating an eclectic and essayistic writing style on the border of philosophy, literature and media-theory. Flusser and Fichte whose life has been decisively influenced by the events of World War II share a similar disillusioned attitude towards the promises of progress. For Flusser the experience of Auschwitz originated a rupture in western history opening up at the same time a new possibility outside linear historical progress itself. Flusser calls it ‘Nachgeschichte’, post-history. As in Fichte’s case, this new way of relating to the world and each other, can already be met with, if only in embryonic form, on Brazilian ground. And there it manifests itself under the sign of the Baroque.

Flusser’s interest for the Baroque as an aesthetic and social experience is mostly architectural. This has probably to do with the fact that biographically he first met with the phenomenon in Prague. As in Fichte’s case, the notion of Baroque has an integrating function, creating meaningful coherence and continuity both on the theoretical and biographical level. In an early essay published in 1961, *Praga, a cidade de Kafka* (Flusser 2002: 63-8) the baroque is seen as a complement and denial of the gothic. Architecturally this contradictory union is expressed in a sort of manieristic ‘conchetto’: the gothic cathedral with the baroque tower. In another text dedicated to Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*, Flusser opposes the gothic cathedral as a metaphor of systematic theorizing, to the unfinished and contradictory attempts of the baroque. “The gothic cathedral of the theological summa of Saint Thomas rises high above (...) the roofs and gables of baroque speculations.” (Flusser 1997: 83)

In *Bildnis des neuen Menschen als Säugling* – Picture of the new man as a baby – written in late 1974 and early 1975 and intended to be the introduction to the planned but never finished *Ça existe la nature?* – Does nature exist? – Flusser describes a millenarian rebellion in the state of Santa Catarina that started in 1912 and was crushed by the army in 1916. The movement proclaimed the end of history in an apocalyptic vision of generalized brotherhood. “It is necessary”, writes Flusser, “to take this (apparent) primitivism seriously.” (Flusser 1994: 191) It was an attempt at synthesis, “welding together completely heterogeneous elements” in a unified Holy Religion, in a way similar to the creation of the Christian belief in the first centuries of our era. Flusser speaks of a “process of crystallization” (*ibid.*) that fore-shortened in a few years a process that would otherwise have taken centuries. Our tradition is falling to pieces, into separate chunks that move in different directions opening up intermediate spaces into which new elements may penetrate. Although, the metaphors used here clearly deny the notion of fluidity, a dynamic aspect is re-introduced through the concept of a playful rearrangement of the different elements involved, that is, of a moment of individual and collective ‘bricolage’.

The same conception can be found in Flusser’s *Brasilien oder die Suche nach dem neuen Menschen* written in the early 1970s. Flusser finds traces of the post-historical world in the baroque churches of Ouro Preto which in his eyes realize the synthesis of a new man. If one manages to overcome one’s Eurocentric point of view, one is faced with a phenomenon in which “Portuguese, oriental (Chinese and Indian), and Negroid elements have been connected to form a synthesis, in which a new kind of human being is beginning to articulate himself (...) here, completely set apart from the stream of history man has given to his will to form nature a new expression (...) out of his unhistorical situation a (...) true synthesis of apparently contradictory elements has been reached (...). An unhistorical culture, that is naive, but not primitive (...).” (*ibid.*: 72)

In *Barroco Mineiro visto de Praga* Flusser explains the relevance of Brazilian Baroque from the point of view of reciprocal forms of intercultural translation. The

European baroque has been translated into a Brazilian setting but by doing this it has been fundamentally altered making a retranslation back to the point of departure possible and, thus, a critical stance towards its origins. As Fichte, Flusser tries to avoid a simplifying, dualistic point of view, which sees in the Brazilian elaboration of the European baroque by a mestizo culture – Flusser calls it “uma realização (...) mulata” (Flusser 1966) – simply a bad copy hiding behind an illusory façade. Similarly, the truth of Candomblé is not to be found in the African gods hiding behind the masks of European saints. It is a complex process of translation and retranslation combining conflicting elements into a new heterogeneous whole.

I would like to conclude by using Fichte’s baroque interpretation of Afro-Brazilian syncretistic cults to point out some limitations of Flusser’s analysis. I would like, furthermore to briefly comment upon the usefulness of the three terms discussed here – that is, syncretism, synthesis and ‘bricolage’ – and the way they are used by Fichte and Flusser with regard to the notion of hybridity.

Despite the introduction of a dynamic element of playfulness Flusser’s stress lies at this point of his career on the notion of overall integration seen as ultimate fusion of the different elements implied. This leads him to a clearly negative view of the syncretistic tendencies inherent in Brazilian culture and to an underestimation of its creative potential, above all in view of European modernism, an aspect that Fichte has clearly pointed out. Commenting upon the cultural mix of occidental, oriental and African moments, Flusser writes that these elements are generally just loosely and syncretistically glued to each other, “nur synkretistisch angeklebt” (Flusser 1994: 132), unwittingly referring to one of the main artistic strategies of modernity: collage. It is exactly this contradictory juxtaposition of diverse elements without an attempt at overall integration that Fichte considers one of the most inspiring aspects of Candomblé. A second point to be made here has to do with Flusser’s problematic view of the specifically Afro-American contribution which he interprets in a reductive way remindful of earlier Eurocentric forms of anthropology. “Os negros” he writes, “são os depositarios da vivencia immemorial

e concreta da sacralidade da natureza.” (Flusser 1966) Fichte’s thorough knowledge of ethnography prevented him from such questionable points of view.

The notions of syncretism and synthesis are clearly open to theoretical criticism but could represent at the same time a possible antidote against one of the main problems with the notion of hybridity. Their insistence on multiplicity and openness and their stress on an ongoing process of creation could remind hybridity of the dangers of duality implicit in the concept of in-betweenness. Contrary to synthesis’ tendency to homogenization, syncretism implies a feeling of possibility, of ‘anything goes’, leading to the creation of a decentred plurality. Finally the ludic dimension of the notion of ‘bricolage’ not only represents an important antidote for a too easily reached unity, both through synthesis and syncretism, it could also help remind hybridity of its biological origins and of the quasi-natural facility of growth and development this involves.

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